



NHL/2010-11



**Tomas Holmstrom**  
Drafted No. 257  
in 1994

**Nicklas Lidstrom**  
Drafted No. 53  
in 1989

**Jiri Hudler**  
Drafted No. 58  
in 2002

**Pavel Datsyuk**  
Drafted No. 171  
in 1998

**Johan Franzen**  
Drafted No. 97  
in 2004

**Niklas Kronwall**  
Drafted No. 29  
in 2000

**Valtteri Filppula**  
Drafted No. 95  
in 2002

**Henrik Zetterberg**  
Drafted No. 210  
in 1999

# Plan D

BY LINDSAY BERRA

SCOUTING IS MORE ART THAN SCIENCE, BUT DETROIT'S FORMULA FOR FINDING SO MUCH CUP-WORTHY TALENT STARTS WITH A SIMPLE RULE: SKILL AND SENSE TRUMP SIZE AND SPEED.



# THE NOVEMBER AIR BLOWING OFF THE GULF OF

Bothnia into the fishing village of Luvia, in south-west Finland, is damp and raw. It's 3 o'clock in the afternoon but already nearly dark. A small crowd files into a prefab steel building, the kind the Finnish Ice Hockey Association put up in bulk to house ice rinks throughout the country. Just inside the doorway, on an open grill, a man cooks makkara, Finnish sausages served charred and hot in waxed paper cones filled with mustard and ketchup. "You've got to try one of these," says Jim Nill, leaning close to the grill for warmth. As assistant GM for the Red Wings, Nill directs the team's amateur scouting program. Given his renown for spotting quality, you would do well to sample the links.

Beyond the entryway, scouts from nearly every other NHL team settle into a bank of frigid bleachers at the Four Nations Cup to grade under-18 prospects on teams representing the

Detroit's secret? An immeasurable combination of scouting-staff continuity, disciplined drafting, a knack for player development and, of course, luck. But if luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity, it helps to have guys like Jim Nill eating *makkara* in rural Finland. "We all see the same games, but through different eyes," says one Eastern Conference scout who, like many of his peers, asked not to be identified "Maybe Jim sees things we don't see."

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**In theory,** scouting is simple, executed in much the same way by every team in the NHL. In rinks from western Canada to eastern Russia, each of a team's 10 or so scouts watches approximately 250 games over the course of a season, first in an assigned area, then overlapping with others to cross-check prospects. After every game, the scouts file reports that ultimately are collated into each team's list of about 200 players, ranked top to bottom for draft day in June.

Scouts must be patient, thorough and willing to endure the coldest, most mind-numbing games to the end, lest a player distinguish himself a split-second before the final buzzer. They must discern whether a potentially good player is sick or having a bad day—or if an

by the time they're draft eligible; Rams No. 1 pick Sam Bradford was 22 on draft day last spring. NFL scouts can also measure prospects against height, weight and speed parameters specific to every position. NHL scouts, on the other hand, are evaluating 17- and 18-year-olds, whose physical characteristics are subject to dramatic change. So the NHL's talent hunters focus first on fundamentals: acceleration, speed, shot strength, accuracy. Then they look deeper. "Identifying the intangibles in a kid is the toughest part of scouting," says Nill, 52. "Small kids can get bigger. Weak kids can get stronger. Bad skaters can learn to skate better. But what is their character like? Will they work hard? You have a gut feeling that only comes from experience."

Year in and year out, the Wings do better at filtering prospects than any team in the league because they adhere to a consistent draft philosophy. The concept of selecting high-skill, high-hockey-IQ skaters was embraced by Jim Devellano, who became Detroit's GM in 1982, after earning three Stanley Cups as a scout and

Nill, in the black leather jacket, spends about 150 nights per year in hotels while scouting in countless anonymous rinks, like this one in Finland. He and his staff wrote reports on 1,500 European and North American players for the 2010 draft. The Wings selected seven.



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**\* "THE TRICK IS TO BE THE GUY LOOKING AT THE KID THE OTHER GUYS AREN'T, AND THAT'S WHAT THE WINGS DO WELL."**

average prospect is having the night of his life. Some uncertainty can be alleviated by watching a player several times and consulting coaches, but even in the best of circumstances, determining the future NHL potential of a teenage player is tricky business.

This is true for scouts in all pro sports, of course, but most football prospects, say, have played at least three years in college and are already adults

assistant GM with the Islanders. Devellano's system is genius because it is designed to find hidden gems in the ranks of seemingly flawed players, a necessity in Detroit given its seldom-prime draft positions. Ken Holland learned the ropes after he was hired as a Wings scout in 1985, and he advanced the team's draft-centric philosophy when he was promoted to GM under Devellano, now a senior VP for the team, in 1997. Holland, in turn, tutored Nill, who has been evaluating talent for the Wings since his nine-year NHL career ended in 1990, in Detroit. Former agents, MBAs and lawyers staff some front offices, but Wings execs are, simply put, hockeyheads. They developed their chops evaluating amateur players in cold rinks in

far-off lands with shoddy cell service. (Holland recalls staking out an outdoor rink three hours from Moscow, with bleachers on one side and a snowbank on the other, lights strung over the red and blue lines. Nill once shuffled across a Siberian tarmac in a snowstorm with an armed escort while a lone worker deiced the prop plane's wings with a bucket of hot water, a stepladder and a broom.) "We've had a scouting-based management team since the early '80s," Nill says. "That continuity has been a big part of our success."

Detroit scouts still adhere to Devellano's philosophy that skill and hockey sense trump size and speed. Skill, scouts say, is easy to see. It's visible in a fluid, extended skating stride, explosiveness off the mark and the ability to sustain top speed. It's announced by a heavy shot or a quick release. No one misses those traits in no-brainer prospects like Alex Ovechkin and Sidney Crosby. But most gifted scouts can also identify subtler skills. These reside in the player who operates on his own personal island of time and space—who sees the play, as scouts like to say, as though he had a mental blueprint of the game. These nuances can also be found in the player who senses pressure before it arrives and deftly uses his body to shield the puck. Both are indications of hockey sense, defined by Nill as "the ability to anticipate and predict what is going to happen before everyone else on the ice sees it happen." It allows a player to get into position and execute plays faster than those around him. It's God-given, unteachable and held sacred by the Wings.

Holland and Nill stayed true to the Wings' values even between their 2002 and 2008 Stanley Cups, when the philosophy that made the team successful also got it criticized for being too small and too soft. A lot of front offices are fickle. They follow one draft philosophy until a managerial change shifts focus from skill to toughness, or from toughness to speed. The inconsistency results in a system filled with a hodgepodge of players with disparate talents. "Many teams don't have a strong identity," says one NHL scout. "But the Wings have had the conviction to stay with their philosophy and take players they think will be better down the road."

Hakan Andersson, Detroit's director of European scouting, is among the world's best at long-term forecasting. If hockey scouting has a superstar, Andersson is it. In 1990, on the recommendation of a departing scout, the Wings hired the affable Swede after his turns as a travel agent, stockbroker and fly-fishing guide. His long-shot picks have helped form the core of today's franchise: Tomas Holmstrom, 257th in 1994. Pavel Datsyuk, 171st in 1998. Henrik Zetterberg, 210th in 1999. Niklas Kronwall, 29th in 2000. Jiri Hudler, 58th, Valtteri Filppula, 95th, and Jonathan Ericsson,

291st, in 2002. Johan Franzen, 97th in 2004. All slipped by other teams, often because of less-than-ideal size. "In a perfect world every player is 6'3"; Andersson says. "But Ken and Jim taught me to look at players from different angles. You may love a player's skating and hate his size, or love his hands and hate his skating. But you have to decide: Do we like him or not, and how high do

**RED WINGS ...**

- HAVE FINISHED NO WORSE THAN SECOND IN THEIR DIVISION SINCE 1992.**
- WON STANLEY CUPS IN**
  - ✓ 1997
  - ✓ 1998
  - ✓ 2002
  - ✓ 2008
- 8** **HAVE HAD JUST EIGHT FIRST-ROUND PICKS SINCE 1995. AVERAGE FIRST SELECTION: NO. 45.**
- 19** **Have made the playoffs 19 consecutive seasons.**
- 13** **Have won their Division 13 times since 1992.**

we like him?" When Andersson champions a player, there's a good chance he'll pan out. Even if it doesn't appear so from the get-go.

Exhibit A: Zetterberg's awkward, choppy stride made him appear slow, but the Wings liked the way he dogged the puck—and they have since learned that his still-ugly stride is deceptively fast. Exhibit B: Based on speed alone, Tomas Holmstrom doesn't even belong in the NHL, says Nill. But Holmstrom's ability to deflect pucks in front of the net is unrivaled in hockey. The list goes on: Hudler, the Wings' 2002 top pick, was, in Holland's words, a "wee piss pot" in his draft year, but Holland recognized his ability to see the ice and distribute the puck; Hudler now has 127 points in 255 NHL games. Datsyuk, meanwhile, was an awkward, 5'8" bag of bones when he met Andersson in a Siberian rink, but he carried the puck as if it were on a string. Now he regularly leads the Red Wings in scoring and is mathematically the biggest draft-day steal of the past 12 years. On average, the 171st pick has produced just .095 points per game since 1998, but Datsyuk produces at a .977 clip. Franzen, originally eligible for the 1999 draft, was passed

over for five years before the Wings rolled the dice. The 6'3", 222-pound forward now dubbed The Mule has since broken two of the legendary Gordie Howe's Red Wing scoring records. "I was at the same events as Hakan, and I don't recall seeing Franzen or Datsyuk or Zetterberg," says another Eastern Conference scout. "The trick is to be the guy looking at the kid the other guys aren't, and that's what the Wings do well."

Patience in player development is another Red Wings strength. While many teams need immediate help from prospects and are reluctant to draft players who aren't NHL-ready, the Wings allow prospects to continue to mature physically and develop skills with their European or junior teams, or with Detroit's American Hockey League affiliate in Grand Rapids, Mich. "I spent nine years in the AHL watching kids get rushed up because teams wanted immediate answers to their problems," Holland says. "So many would go up and come back a few weeks later with no confidence. They're kids, not mature enough or ready to make a difference. So we don't ask them to."

The Wings are also known for holding, signing and trading for aging-yet-ultraskilled NHLers, making their lineup one of the NHL's toughest to crack. Only 16 teenagers have done it since the 18-year-old Yzerman made his debut in 1983. The prospects who eventually are promoted are the absolute cream of the franchise's crop. Of the 104 Detroit draft picks from 1995 through 2006, only 30, or 28.8%, have played a single NHL game—lowest in the league. And only 14.4% have played at least 82 NHL games, second-lowest in the league. But the players who do hang with the big club learn from legends and greatly outperform expectations. It's the most virtuous cycle you could hope for if you're building a dynasty, or the closest one can come to a dynasty in modern sports.

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**Back in** Finland, the search for future stars isn't bearing fruit. Turns out, those sausages performed better than the quartet of U.S. defensemen Nill was eyeing. At this past June's draft in Los Angeles, the Wings uncharacteristically used their top pick on Riley Sheahan, a big, North American forward from Notre Dame who impressed with conscientious, three-zone play. Later, they nabbed Calle Jarnkrok, No. 51 overall, from the Swedish League, and Teemu Pulkkinen, No. 111 overall, from the Finnish League. Jarnkrok is 5'11" and 156 pounds, and was described in one draft blog as a "soft, seldom-shooting midget." Pulkkinen, says one scout, "has average size and is an average skater, but all he does is score."

They might as well call both Detroit specials. ☺